

THE FIRST GLIMMER OF EXTERMINATION

Plate-Glass Pogrom—and Aftermath

MELVIN J. LASKY

SEVERAL days after the anti-Semitic *Kristallnacht* outburst of November 8, 1938, a high Nazi conference was called in Berlin. The object of the conference, which was led by Joseph Goebbels and Hermann Goering, was to reassess the position of the Jew in German society, and to draw the appropriate consequences from the riots and arson which signified the Third Reich's final break with the so-called "non-Aryan" elements.

It was Goebbels who began. The report in his hand indicated that 101 synagogues had been burned and 76 others demolished, and all in all some 7500 stores and businesses destroyed. These eyesores were to be

The Nazis left many a mystery behind them—history has still to fathom the motivations of that strange compound of savagery and sophistication, cold calculation and blind irrationality, bureaucratic routinization and sheer mad impulse, that was the Hitlerian mentality. For example—and this is perhaps the deepest enigma of all—just when (and for what "reason") did the ruling clique decide to exterminate the Jews? Some light on the birth of this awful policy—which by its suggestion of the influence of a relatively trivial factor (the irritating cost of plate-glass insurance) makes the fantastic even more fantastic—is afforded by this account drawn from a stenographic report, taken from Nazi files, of a meeting of Hitler's highest counselors. Piecing together relevant passages from the original documents into a consecutive narrative, MELVIN J. LASKY enables us to see foreshadowings of the crematoria of Birkenau. Mr. Lasky has been correspondent in Germany for the *New Leader* ever since the end of the war. Some months ago, his speech in defense of intellectual freedom at a Soviet-sponsored "cultural congress" was reported widely in the American press. Mr. Lasky was born in New York in 1920, and attended the College of the City of New York and the University of Michigan.

cleaned up. And of all the suggestions as to how to use the new open spaces, Goebbels favored his own—"more parking lots." The suggestion was accepted as a significant contribution to the solution of the *Lebensraum* problem. From this, Goebbels went on to the necessity of legally isolating the Jews in the German community.

"Jews will be forbidden to attend German theaters, cinemas, and circuses. I think that our current theatrical situation can stand it. The theaters are always filled up anyway. We just don't have any more space. . . . Jews should no longer be allowed to sit next to Germans. Maybe a little later one or two houses here in Berlin can be set aside for them where they can see Jewish movies. . . ."

The time had apparently come when the presence of Jews was "a provocation." The conference became alarmed at the possibility that a Jew and a German, under the present conditions, could be sharing the same sleeping-car accommodations. "Then give them a car of their own," said Goering. "But suppose," answered Goebbels, "there aren't too many Jews taking the D-train to Munich. Suppose there are only two Jews in the whole car, and all the other sections are filled up. Why then these Jews really have super-special accommodations!" Goering wasn't too upset: "Then we really don't need a special law—simply throw them out or let them sit out the trip in the toilet. . . ." For Goebbels, however, this only complicated the problem; for this would contradict the new law which forbade Jews to use German toilets, German baths, and German swimming-pools. "All right," said Goering. "We'll give them some of their own. . . ." This left, however, other difficulties unsolved. For the Jews, according to another Goeb-

bels clause, were to be forbidden to clutter up German woods and forests.

"All right, all right," said Goering finally. "We'll give them a special wooded section of their own. And Alpers here will see to it that the various animals who look damned like the Jews—elks, you know, have exactly the same kind of crooked nose—come there and settle down. . . ."

Goebbels pressed further. "But then there are Jews who don't look very Jewish!" "And they don't even say that they are Jews!" added Goering. This, clearly, constituted a special problem and a new danger. "Why, Jews like that can sit themselves down among German mothers and children and begin to louse the place up (*zu mosern und zu stänkern*)!" This issue was resolved with special benches for Jews, and special schools for Jewish children.

AND then the conference dropped this theme to take up what was apparently a far more urgent matter. Goering called in Herr Hilgard, chief representative of the German insurance companies.

"The problem is this," Goering began. "Through the justified anger of the people against the Jews a certain amount of damage has been caused in the country. Windows have been broken, property damaged, people hurt, synagogues burned, *und so weiter*. I suppose that some of the Jews, probably most of them, were completely covered by insurance. . . ." Hilgard said yes. "Then instead of hurting the Jews, the people in their justified reprisals simply caused damages which will be paid for by German insurance companies. . . ." But that obviously could be easily handled with a ruling which stopped all payments. "Still, the question that passionately interests me is what to do in case these German companies are covered by re-insurance with foreign guarantors. I wouldn't want to miss the chance to pick up some foreign exchange, which after all wouldn't go to the Jews but to the German economy. . . ."

Hilgard painfully clarified the situation. There was thorough coverage by insurance

—against fire, against theft, and against glass breakage. Nor were the damages of the *Kristallnacht* confined to Jews alone. The fire in the synagogues reached into neighboring Aryan buildings; much of the property in the Jewish stores was there only on a commission basis; and as for the glass, why in most cases the Jews were only tenants and the losses hit the landlords.

At this point Goering exploded. "What madness! We don't have any raw materials—it's all foreign glass—and that costs foreign exchange! It's enough to drive one crazy (*Man koennte die Waende hochgehen*)!"

The news was very bitter. Glass for stores like those along the Kurfuerstendamm came almost exclusively from Belgium. The total "Aryan damages" amounted to about six million marks (two million dollars), or about a half-year's production of the Belgian glass industry. That was the total loss in money and in time.

GOERING was hard hit. "We'll have to explain all that to the people!" But Goebbels sharply interrupted him. "That can't possibly be done at this time." "But it can't go on like this," argued Goering. "We simply won't be able to stand it! Impossible!"

Still there were angles to be explored. "What about burglary?" Goering asked. "When goods are dragged out of the store and burned on the street, is that also covered? . . . Wouldn't that be covered by riot? And there is scarcely any riot-coverage in modern insurance. . . ." But Hilgard would not confuse "theft" and "burglary" with "riot" and "tumult." "But this is really *riot*!" Goering insisted. "That's a legal concept! This is not a matter of *larceny* or of *house-breaking*. Right out in the open the masses rolled along and destroyed things. That's a *riot*! Or *tumult*!" Maybe tumult, Hilgard conceded, but not riot. "All right, then tumult. Does the insurance cover that?" But he was on the wrong track. "Take the case of Margraf on Unter den Linden. This, as one of Berlin's largest jewelry shops, had special police insurance. And the insurance covers every damage that could possibly take place.

The total loss reported to us amounts to 1.7 million, because the store was thoroughly plundered. . . ."

Goering exploded for a second time. "Daluge and Heydrich! You'll get me those jewels back by mass raids!" Daluge promised. The people would be constantly subjected to controls. Already one hundred and fifty arrests had been made. Goering felt a little better. "Otherwise the things will be got rid of. If some one comes along and says he bought the jewels, just take them ruthlessly away, and don't make a big fuss about it. . . ."

Heydrich complained that it would not be so easy. The jewels had been tossed out on to the streets and there they disappeared. The same had happened with the fur shops in the Friedrichstrasse. All the minks and skunks are gone. Kids stuffed themselves and took off. In the future, he suggested lamely, Hitler youth should always coordinate their activities with the Party. Daluge added that the police should snoop around for gossip in the neighborhoods—neighbors would always know if the woman next door had a new ring or fur coat.

This time it was Hilgard, national chief of the German insurance companies, who began to feel pained. He spoke sincerely about *unsere Haftpflicht*; their liability was a duty, a point of honor, and he asked to submit the petition of the insurance directorates. "We think it of profound importance, Herr Generalfeldmarschall, that no obstacles be placed in the way of the fulfillment of our contractual obligations. . . ." Answered Goering: "But that's what I must do, and I think that's of profound importance." Hilgard tried to explain. "It's a matter of our international business connections. Our foreign contacts are very important and profitable, and in the interests of Germany's favorable foreign-exchange balance it is vital that confidence in our insurance companies remain intact. If we today reject our legal commitments, our contractual obligations, that would be a black spot on the escutcheon of German insurance." "But not," countered Goering, "if

I passed a national statute to that effect. . . ."

Heydrich saved the situation. "Why not let the insurance companies shell out, but then at the pay-off simply confiscate all the cash? That way all the formalities are taken care of. . . ." Hilgard agreed, but wanted to make sure that the payment would be considered a legal and final transaction. "Just a moment!" interrupted Goering. "You'll have to shell out in any case, but where Jews are involved you'll have a legal prohibition, and the money will be handed over to the Minister of Finance. . . ." "Aha!" said Hilgard. But then came the insurance companies' suggestion: could not a certain percentage of that sum be returned to the companies to help cover the terrific damages? "Nein!" Goering shouted. "*Ich denke gar nicht daran!* The insurance companies are liable. No, the money belongs to the state, that's clear. No gifts for the insurance companies!"

Hilgard and the other insurance officials tried to make the extent of the financial catastrophe clear. The damages taken together would amount to more than twenty-five million marks. Heydrich added thoughtfully an estimate of how much taxes the state had lost.

GOERING began to feel very depressed. "*Mir waere lieber gewesen,*" he said, "I would have preferred that you beat up two hundred Jews and not destroy so much property and lose so much money (*solche Werte vernichten*). . . ."

Funk insisted on his solution: simply don't pay! But Hilgard thought it important that at least the formal gesture of payment be made.

"Well, gentlemen," Goering finally said, "it's clear as daylight. The insurance companies will pay for the damages. They want to pay for the damages. Fine. I can hardly believe that the costs would be too high. We have been assured that the insurance companies have been doing good business, and abroad too, so I'm sure the profits of the past will be sufficient to cover these losses. If the little companies get into difficulties,

why it would be a good thing if they went out of business anyway. As for the question of Jewish damages, the jewels from Margraf, and so on—here the state collects, minus such items as the police recover. As for the rest, the costs are marked over to the Jews; they'll pay. . . . And as for the foreign insurance companies involved, sure they must pay, and we'll confiscate that. . . ."

Hilgard apparently looked hurt, and Goering tried to cheer him up. "Look! The Jews suffered the damages and they're insured; they get the payments but we confiscate them. The end result is a profit for the insurance companies because for a part of the damages they don't have to pay. Herr Hilgard, you ought to be grinning!" Hilgard couldn't see it. How could non-payment of damages be called a profit?

Goering was patient. "If you please!" he began again. "You have to pay five million, see, and then all of a sudden along comes an angel in my rather corpulent form and tells you: a million of that you can keep. *Zum Donnerwetter noch einmal*, is that no profit?" And here Goering tried to make two rather badly phrased Jewish jokes about how rich Hilgard was. "I ought to get out and arrange a *chuppe* with you, or however one says it. . . ." "Anyway," he told him, "you're grinning all over. You made a nice little *rebbe*s [sic]. . . ."

Hilgard was cold and unconvinced. "It is

for me a self-evident thing that the honorable German businessman should not be the sufferer in this situation. I have promised that Aryans would not be saddled with the huge losses. But that is precisely where the losses now lie, because it is the insurance community which has been hit—premiums grow higher, dividends lower. Here is where the losses really rest. . . ."

"If that happens to be the case," said Field-Marshal Hermann Goering in his unforgettable conclusion, "*then take some trouble next time and see to it that not so much window-glass gets smashed up! You also belong to the people. Send your representatives out into the streets! Let them spread enlightenment!*"

There were no more questions or problems.

The conference was over. Goebbels had added up the political balance of the *Kristallnacht* pogrom. Goering had attended to the bookkeeping.

If there were Jews, there would have to be riots, and windows would be broken, and goods stolen, and German insurance companies would suffer, and there would continue to be all kinds of complications and nuisance and bother to honest German businessmen and loyal Aryan masses. But if there were no more Jews—

The liquidation of the Jews could now begin in earnest.